



Sever by CrackintoastGromit

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Summary: It's the summer of 1985, and Faye Wheeler believes things have finally gone back to normal in the town of Hawkins. How wrong can a person be... Sequel to Tether. SPOILERS FOR SEASON 3 OF STRANGER THINGS.

1. Teenage mutant ninja hormones

Hello readers! It's finally here - the long-awaited sequel to Tether! Thank you so much to everyone who has followed this story, particularly those who took the time to message me or leave a review. It really does mean a lot! Just to let you know, all of my other stories (including Faded, the prequel to Tether) are currently on hold while I concentrate on this.

IF YOU HAVEN'T SEEN SEASON 3 OF STRANGER THINGS, DO NOT READ THIS!

I'm hoping to upload a new chapter every couple of weeks, but it could be more or less frequent depending on how much time I have. As always, reviews are greatly appreciated - enjoy!

PREFACE

It wasn't supposed to happen like this.

The room spins as Faye struggles to her feet, wincing at the searing pain in her head. It feels like a screwdriver is being drilled into her skull. There's blood everywhere. Some of it isn't hers, but most of it is.

A few feet away, the monster growls - the sound reverberating through the small room as if it's coming from every direction. Maybe it is, maybe there are a hundred of them all closing in on her, biding their time to strike. Not that it matters. All it takes is one.

Faye draws herself up to full height, but she's dwarfed by the grotesque predator before her. Strangely, she doesn't feel scared. Perhaps the head trauma has made her delirious, but the only emotion coursing through her is anger.

You'll be dead soon too

The monster hisses, as if it can hear what she's thinking.

If the Russians don't kill you, she will

Rows upon rows of blood-soaked teeth flash dangerously as the Demogorgon prepares to attack-

Faye closes her eyes and thinks of Will.

Bang bang bang

"FAYE! GET OUT OF THE BATHROOM!"

Fourteen year old Faye Wheeler ignores her sister's screeches while she inspects her reflection in the mirror. Her mouth twists into a frown as she decides something is missing, before she spots a pink lipstick by the sink.

"YOU BETTER NOT BE USING MY MAKEUP IN THERE!"

The door handle jiggles furiously. Grimacing, Faye carefully replaces Nancy's lipstick where she found it and blots off the excess. She then re-evaluates her appearance - still not right. Suddenly, Faye remembers a tip her and Max read in *Super Teen* the other day. Unravelling a wad of toilet paper, she carefully folds and places it inside her bra.

"I SWEAR TO GOD IF YOU DON'T GET OUT HERE RIGHT NOW YOU CAN WALK TO WILL'S HOUSE!"

Faye rolls her eyes. "OKAY OKAY!"

After a final check in the mirror, Faye unlocks the bathroom door to reveal a very disgruntled-looking Nancy. "You were in there for nearly an hour!"

"Still three hours off your record," Faye retorts.

Nancy huffs and shoves past her. "And if you're going to stuff your bra, at least do it properly."

Faye flushes, crossing her arms over her chest - but before she can reply Nancy slams the door in her face. Scowling, Faye tiptoes into her sister's bedroom and finds a bottle of tanning lotion on the dresser, which she proceeds to squeeze into the tub of face cream

beside it. Nancy usually puts the cream on before she goes to bed, which means when she wakes up in the morning she'll get a nasty surprise. *Good luck explaining that at work tomorrow.*

Feeling pleased with herself, Faye heads downstairs to wait for her ride, but her good mood quickly diminishes when she hears arguing coming from the kitchen. Mrs. Wheeler is screaming at the top of her lungs while Mr. Wheeler is trying to calm her down, but from the sounds of it isn't having much success. Faye sighs, wondering what it's about this time; yesterday it was Mr. Wheeler being late to pick up Holly, the day before it was Mrs. Wheeler spending too much time at the Hawkins Community Pool, and last week they argued for three days straight over a sock drawer. Who argues about *socks*?!

The Wheelers have never exactly been 'one big happy family', but even for them this is bad. Whereas before it was just the odd snide comment or withering stare, it's now full-blown screaming matches day in and day out. Faye, Mike and Nancy have been trying to ignore it and act normal for Holly's sake, but there's a noticeable tension whenever Mr and Mrs. Wheeler are in the same room.

Faye keeps expecting to come home and find her parents sitting on the couch, waiting to announce that they're getting a divorce. Max said that was what happened with her mom before she started dating Billy's dad. It's not the idea of her parents divorcing that bothers Faye, it's the thought of what might happen next. What if they have to sell the house? Or worse - what if they have to leave Hawkins altogether? Faye's whole life is here; the thought of having to give up her home, her school, her friends and everything she's ever known terrifies her. But it's nothing compared to the thought of having to give up Will. That simply doesn't bear thinking about.

When Nancy finally emerges from the bathroom, Faye loads her bike into the trunk of the car (so that she and Will can ride to Starcourt later to meet the others) before they set off for the Byers' house. One benefit of Nancy dating Jonathan is that Faye doesn't have to make the journey across town so often. The downside is that hearing your siblings fooling around in the next room is a real mood killer when you're trying to make out.

Jonathan comes outside to greet them when they pull up. He's

wearing a nice shirt and Faye gets a whiff of cologne as he walks past. *Great - another live sex show commencing any minute.*

At that moment, Will appears on the porch. He smiles when he sees Faye and her stomach flutters with excitement; even after six months of dating, sometimes she still can't believe that Will is her boyfriend. As he walks down the steps, Faye could swear he looks taller than the last time she saw him (even though it was only a couple of days ago). Up until recently, Will was always the shortest of the group, but now he's second only to Lucas in height - much to Mike's dismay. He also managed to beat Dustin at an arm wrestle before he left for summer camp. And if you listen closely when he talks, Will's voice is getting deeper; Faye would never admit it, but she finds his new voice really hot.

"Hey."

"Hey," Faye replies, grinning like an idiot.

Will leans in to kiss her, but Jonathan suddenly interrupts.

"Hey, no funny business you two."

They turn around to find their siblings staring at them disapprovingly. Will raises his eyebrows. "You're seriously telling *us* that?"

"We're adults, we can do what we like."

"You mean *who* you like," Faye mutters.

Will chokes on a laugh, Nancy stares daggers at Faye and Jonathan just looks embarrassed. The pair quickly head into the house, leaving Faye and Will alone on the porch.

"Wanna go to Castle Byers?" Will asks.

A high-pitched moan from inside has Faye nodding eagerly. "Please."

Will takes her hand and they walk through the woods surrounding the Byers' residence until they reach the small clearing where the castle is located. Faye ducks inside and breathes in the familiar,

earthy scent; feeling the stress of the past few days slowly draining away. Just as she is beginning to relax, out of nowhere Will launches himself at her and the two collapse into a heap of flailing limbs. His hands immediately find the ticklish spots beneath her ribs and Faye squeaks and flinches away, but Will just laughs and pins her down. Giggling uncontrollably, Faye tries in vain to break free of his hold, finding that Will is stronger than he looks. Only when they're both out of breath from laughing does he finally let go.

"You suck at tickle fights," Will announces, brushing the hair out of his eyes.

Pouting, Faye pushes herself up. "Yeah well, know what I don't suck at?"

"What?"

"This."

Without hesitation, Faye presses her lips against Will's. He is caught off guard at first, but soon kisses her back with equal vigor. Given that they've spent the majority of the past six months joined at the hip, they've both become pretty good kissers. However, their make out sessions are restricted to when they have time alone, as both Faye and Will value their privacy. Unlike Mike and El, who can't seem to go five minutes without sucking face - no matter who's watching.

The most they ever do in public is hold hands, or occasionally kiss on the cheek. Which makes moments like these - with no-one around to disturb them - even more amazing. Faye wonders how long they could hide out in Castle Byers before someone came looking for them; probably no more than a day, but she's more than willing to test the theory. When they break the kiss, Will's eyes definitely linger on her chest longer than usual. Faye suppresses a smirk - she'll have to tell Max that the toilet paper trick really works.

"You definitely don't suck at that," Will grins.

Faye pecks his lips a final time before they settle into a comfortable position, with Will's arm wrapped around her and Faye's head resting on his chest.

"How're your mom and dad?"

"Worse," Faye answers. "At dinner last night, no-one said a word the entire time. I even skipped dessert just so I could get away quicker."

"Wow, it must be bad then," Will teases, earning an elbow in the side.

Faye thinks for a moment. "Is this what your parents were like before they separated?"

There's a pause as Will considers this. "Yeah kinda. They argued a lot, then dad started staying out late, then not coming home at all."

As far as Faye is aware, neither of her parents are staying out late. Her mom is spending almost every day at the pool, but she always comes back in the evening. And her dad never really goes anywhere, apart from work. Still, Faye can't shake the feeling that something's not right.

"I'm just scared they'll get divorced and mom will make us leave Hawkins."

Will stiffens underneath her. "Couldn't you just, change her mind? With your powers?"

"It doesn't really work like that."

Faye is still learning the extent of her mind control abilities. Ever since the incident with the Mind Flayer last year, she has been practising with El every week (when she can tear her away from Mike). Hopper doesn't approve, and thinks she and El should only use their powers when absolutely necessary - but come on. Who the hell would find out they have superpowers then *not* use them?! Faye is already a lot stronger than she was, but the more she improves, the more her limitations become clearer too.

Faye can manipulate a person's mind in the short term, but not so much in the long term. Whenever she tries to explain it, Faye likens her abilities to using a TV remote; you can turn the TV off and on, change the channels, do whatever you want - as long as you're holding the remote. The second you put it down, it's not in your control anymore. If Mrs. Wheeler decided that she wanted to leave

Hawkins tomorrow, there wouldn't be anything Faye could do about it.

"Well I guess we'd just have to run away together then."

Faye looks round in surprise. "What?"

"Run away together, you and me," Will clarifies. "We'll save up some money, get on a bus and go."

Sitting up, Faye stares at Will and tries to work out whether he's joking. When it becomes clear that he's not, her heart doubles its pace.

"We can't run away, we're kids!"

"You and El did last year to Chicago," Will points out. "Besides, if I can survive in the Upside Down on my own, I'm pretty sure I can handle the United States."

He has a point. Suddenly, the idea doesn't sound so outrageous - in fact, it's rather tempting... Much better than hiding out in Castle Byers, anyway. If they were smart enough, no-one would be able to find them. They could go anywhere they wanted, just her and Will. No siblings, no parents, nothing to get in the way of them being together. A surge of longing steals through Faye at the prospect.

"Are you asking me to run away with you, Will Byers?"

Will smiles, his green eyes glistening with excitement. "Maybe I am. Are you saying yes?"

Faye bites her lip. "Maybe I am."

"So it's settled," Will states. "If anyone or anything ever tries to split us up, we go. Deal?"

"Deal," Faye nods.

This time, it's Will who catches her off guard with a kiss. His hands gently grip the sides of her face and Faye's breath hitches in pleasure. Grabbing fistfuls of his shirt, Faye pulls him against her so that their

bodies are perfectly aligned, but just as things are starting to get heated - Will's radio buzzes.

"I'm sure you guys are busy making out right now," Lucas' voice announces. "But take a cold shower and meet us at the movie theatre in 20 minutes. Over and out."

The radio goes silent and Faye and Will break apart, panting heavily. For a moment neither of them speak, and then Will drops his head to her shoulder and they both burst out laughing.

"Damn you, Lucas."

2. Dustin & Suzie

"Alright, that's it!" Faye exclaims. "He's fifteen minutes late, we're going in without him."

The group agreed to meet outside Starcourt Mall at 7PM to watch *Day of the Dead*, and yet it's almost 7:20 and there's no sign of Mike. Faye is rapidly running out of patience with her twin; now they're all going to miss the movie because he couldn't be bothered to show up on time. Sure, she understands that Mike wants to spend time with El (and it sucks that Hopper is still keeping her under house arrest), but this is ridiculous.

"I second that," nods Lucas.

"Oh come on," says Max. "Just give him a few more minutes."

Faye sighs impatiently. She hates waiting - especially for her stupid brother. A hand slips through hers and she glances up to see Will giving her his 'be nice' face; over the years, Will has become the unofficial mediator of the Wheeler twins. Whenever she and Mike start an argument, Will is usually the one who finishes it. Luckily this time he doesn't have to because Mike cycles across the parking lot moments later.

"You're late," Lucas states.

"Again," Faye emphasises.

Mike dismounts and chains up his bike, oblivious to their scathing tones. "I'm sorry."

"We're gonna miss the opening," Will complains.

"Yeah if you guys keep whining about it," Mike responds, strutting past them without a care.

"I'll give him something to whine about," Faye mutters as they head inside, making Will and Max snigger.

They rush through the crowds and zigzag their way down the

escalator, passing several disgruntled mall-goers. When they reach the lower level, Faye spots Erica - Lucas' little sister - sitting by the fountain with her friends. Faye has always liked Erica; she might only be 10 years old, but she's got more wit than most people twice her age. Particularly when it comes to Lucas.

"Hey Erica," Faye greets.

"Hi Faye," Erica replies. "Hi nerds."

Lucas glares at her. "Isn't it past your bedtime?"

"Isn't it time you died?" Erica counters.

Faye chokes on a laugh. Case and point. The Sinclair siblings proceed to shout 'butthead' and 'fartface' at each other across the mall - causing several people to turn and stare - until Max drags Lucas away. The group then take their usual detour through Scoops Ahoy, where Steve now works as an ice cream attendant. When he sees them coming, Steve's eyes widen in disbelief.

"Again? Seriously?" he asks.

The rest of them just stare at him expectantly, so Steve sighs and ushers them behind the counter. There's a maintenance tunnel that leads from the back of the ice cream parlor directly to the movie theatre; it's supposed to be strictly staff-only, but no-one ever checks it. Steve reminds them that if anyone finds out he let them through, they're dead; Faye almost points out that Steve's threats aren't exactly intimidating (given that he's lost fights to both Jonathan Byers and Billy Hargrove - not to mention being slapped in the face by Nancy), but decides against it. They hurry down the tunnel and emerge into the foyer of the movie theatre with five minutes to spare. Just as they think the coast is clear, a voice calls out from behind them. "HEY!"

Faye spins around and sees an angry security guard marching in their direction. Lucas swears under his breath.

"What're you kids doing?!" he demands.

It's probably a bad idea. They're in a public place, in a confined area - anyone could walk by. But Faye didn't wait all that time only to be

thrown out before they've even seen the movie. Taking a deep breath, she steps forward and locks eyes with the guard.

He freezes instantly and his expression glazes over, as if he forgot what he was saying. Faye concentrates, feeling the now familiar prickle of energy down her arm as she reaches out towards him. El has been trying to teach her how to use her powers with eye contact alone, but Faye prefers to use her whole body; to let the charge flow through her until her fingertips are crackling with energy. The muscles in her chest tighten like a bowstring, then snap forwards in a sudden burst as the arrow finds its mark. Faye feels strongest when she embraces the physical aspect of her power, rather than confining it to her mind. Like it's truly a part of her, instead of just a crazy fluke.

The guard obediently backs away and Faye inclines her head down the hall - motioning to the others to run for it. Only when they're safely inside the screen room does she break the connection. The guard blinks hard and sways on his feet, and Faye takes the opportunity to escape while he's disoriented - discreetly wiping the blood from her nose.

"That was awesome!" Max exclaims.

"Yeah - we were *this* close to being busted!" Lucas echoes.

Will grins proudly. "I totally have the best girlfriend."

Mike just rolls his eyes. Apparently, mind control is only impressive when El does it.

Someone nearby shushes them so the group quickly find their seats, just as the opening credits begin. There isn't enough space for them to sit together, so Faye, Will and Mike take one row, while Lucas and Max sit in front. Will unzips his backpack and starts handing out the snacks, saving a pack of Reese's for him and Faye. Once he's finished, his hand finds hers on the armrest and they instinctively lace together. However, just as the movie gets going, the screen flickers and blacks out.

A roar of outrage goes up from the audience. Groaning, Faye cranes

her neck to see if the projector is broken, when suddenly she feels something cold against her fingers. She is about to pull away, until she realises it's Will's skin.

"Will?"

Will doesn't respond. His free hand clutches the back of his neck and his eyes are wide and unblinking. The cold is almost painful against Faye's skin - it's like he's submerged his hand in a bucket of ice water. Something unpleasant coils in the pit of her stomach. She's felt this coldness before... the day on the field. When she first saw the Mind Flayer.

Panic spikes in Faye's chest. What if Will is having one of his episodes; a flashback to the Upside Down, or worse, a vision of the monster. No, it can't be. The Mind Flayer is gone and the Gate is closed - only El can open it. And yet Will's skin is so cold and his expression is just empty... like he's not really there. Faye doesn't know what to do. Should she take him outside? Should she tell the others? Should she call Ms. Byers?

Faye is halfway out of her seat when the projector sputters back to life and Will's whole body jerks.

"Will?!"

He's white as a sheet and there are beads of perspiration dotted on his forehead. Hearing the commotion, Mike leans in. "What's going on?"

"It's okay," Will answers, eventually. "I'm fine."

Faye stares at him, unconvinced. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah, of course," Will insists.

He squeezes her hand reassuringly, then turns his attention to the movie. Faye and Mike exchange worried looks, but there's nothing they can do except take his word for it. Sitting back in her seat, Faye does her best to put the concerns aside; maybe it wasn't an episode, maybe Will just had a funny turn. Regardless, no matter how hard she tries, Faye can't seem to shake off a chill for the rest of the

evening.

The next day, Dustin is due to return from summer camp. Mrs. Henderson left early in the morning to pick him up, allowing plenty of time for the rest of them to make preparations for his Welcome Home party. As the group's resident artists, Faye and Will are tasked with making a banner, while the others set up decorations and food (which mostly consists of leftover snacks from the night before). Mike and El have even agreed to sacrifice precious makeout time to help, which is nothing short of a miracle.

Faye is looking forward to having the Party back together again, but she can't help being distracted by what happened at the movie theatre. On the way home last night, she took Will aside and questioned him about the blackout, and Will reluctantly admitted that he felt a kind of cold presence - like how he used to feel whenever the Mind Flayer was near. Faye knew it couldn't be a coincidence; there was just something about that icy feeling that was horribly familiar. Will said it was as if something was breathing down the back of his neck, which Faye didn't like the sound of at all, but she was careful not to overreact. She knows how much Will hates being treated like a baby. When Faye asked whether they should tell the others, Will immediately refused - not wanting to steal Dustin's thunder at his own party.

"Okay, they'll be here any minute," Max announces. "Does everyone know what to do?"

"Yes," the group respond in unison.

Lucas shakes his head. "I still think we should hide in the living room."

"No, because Dustin has to walk past the living room to get to his bedroom. We've been over this," Mike states.

"What if he wants a glass of water?" asks Lucas.

"He won't!"

"How do you know?!"

"Because he always carries soda in his backpack," Will points out.

Unwilling to be proven wrong, Lucas folds his arms. "Fine, what if he wants ice?"

"Why would he want ice?!" exclaims Mike.

"Uh, hello! Because it's *hot*, genius."

While their boyfriends argue, Faye, Max and El roll their eyes at each other and try not to laugh. Suddenly, Faye spots Mrs. Henderson's car pulling up outside. "They're here!"

Everyone springs to their feet and ducks into the kitchen to hide, ignoring Lucas' protests. It wouldn't be a true Welcome Home party without a little prank. Will grips Faye's hand as they're pressed against the wall, and they grin at each other as the front door opens. Dustin stomps straight to his bedroom, and Mike mouths "Told you" at Lucas - who gives him the finger. Taking her cue, El closes her eyes and the sound of robotic beeping carries down the hall, followed by Dustin's cautious footsteps.

"It's just a dream," he tells himself. "You're dreaming."

Peering around the corner, Max gives a thumbs up and the group creep into the living room - party horns at the ready. One... two... three.

"SURPRISE!"

Dustin lets out a high-pitched squeal and squirts a jet of hairspray into Lucas' face. The others leap out of the way and cover their ears as Lucas starts screaming too.

"WHAT THE SHIT?!" Dustin yells. "YOU ALMOST GAVE ME A HEART ATTACK!"

"YOU ALMOST BLINDED ME!" Lucas replies, rubbing the hairspray out of his eyes.

"IT WAS SELF DEFENCE!"

Well that didn't go exactly as planned. "Um," Faye shrugs. "Welcome home?"

After things have calmed down, Max leads a half-blind Lucas into the bathroom to wash his face, while the rest of them head to Dustin's bedroom where he shows them a strange collection of inventions he made at summer camp. There's a clock with a windmill attached, some sort of electric hammer, and finally Dustin's "Masterpiece"; which appears to be a duffel bag full of wires and microphones.

"I would like you to meet Cerebro," Dustin announces, beaming with pride.

Mike frowns. "What exactly are we looking at here?"

"An unassembled, one-of-a-kind, battery powered radio tower!"

There's a pause.

"So it's a ham radio," Will clarifies.

Dustin grins. "The *Cadillac* of ham radios. This baby carries a crystal clear connection over vast distances - I'm talking North Pole to South. I can talk to my girlfriend wherever and whenever I choose."

Faye, Will, Mike and El look at each other in astonishment. "Girlfriend?!"

A self-satisfied expression appears on Dustin's face. "That's right. No more seventh-wheeling for me!"

For a moment, the shock of this revelation renders them silent; but within seconds, Dustin is gunned down by questions.

"What's her name?"

"Where's she from?"

"How long have you been going out?"

"Is she cute?"

"Is she real?"

Dustin raises his voice above the clamor. "Hey! Hey! One at a time, please! Her name is Suzie, she's from Utah. We've been dating for a couple of weeks. She's a genius, and she's not just cute, she's *gorgeous* - think Phoebe Cates, only hotter."

"Who's Phoebe Cates?" El frowns.

"Come on!" says Dustin, grabbing the duffel bag. "I'll show you."

With that, the group set off to meet Dustin's girlfriend - which isn't a sentence Faye ever expected to say. At least not quite in this context. According to Dustin, Cerebro works best at 100 meters, so they head for the fields just outside town where there are several steep hills. There's too much equipment to take on the bikes, meaning the only way to get there is on foot. Under the scorching June sun, it takes the better part of two hours just to get to the fields, then another two to find and climb a hill that's high enough. By the time they're approaching the top, Faye is about ready to pass out.

"Hey guys!"

Panting, they turn around and see Mike and El have stopped a little ways down the hill.

Mike grimaces. "This was fun and all, but..."

"I have to go home," says El.

"We're almost there!" Dustin exclaims.

"Sorry man - curfew," shrugs Mike. He grabs El's hand and starts to lead her back the way they came.

El smiles. "Good luck."

Before anyone can stop them, the pair run off giggling like a couple of schoolgirls. Faye just rolls her eyes, too exhausted to argue.

Dustin checks his watch. "Curfew at four?!"

"They're lying," Lucas states.

"It's been like this all summer," adds Will.

Max stares after them wistfully. "It's romantic."

Faye scoffs. "It's gross."

"It's bullshit!" Dustin snaps. "I just got home."

There's genuine hurt in his voice that makes Faye feel guilty on Mike's behalf.

"I've tried talking to him, but he won't listen."

Dustin shakes his head. "Well, their loss right? Onwards and upwards! Suzie awaits!"

With renewed energy, he sets off up the hill - Lucas and Max groaning in pursuit. Faye starts to follow, then realises after a few steps that Will isn't with them. She glances over her shoulder to find him standing completely still and clutching the back of his neck - just like he did at the movie theatre.

"Will?" Faye calls, suddenly nervous. "What is it?"

Will's expression is grave and he answers in a low voice. "I felt it again. The cold presence."

A shiver runs up Faye's spine. "Where? When?"

"Just now. It's like it was coming from behind me," replies Will, anxiously.

Swallowing thickly, Faye looks out across the countryside and becomes uncomfortably aware of how exposed they are. There have no shelter, no weapons and no way to call for help - apart from Dustin's unassembled radio, if it even works. She strains her eyes and tries to pick out anything unusual; an out-of-place shadow, a strange shape lurking between the trees... but the only movement is the

breeze blowing through the grass and the now distant figures of Mike and El.

"Hey! Don't you guys even think about running off too!" Dustin shouts down.

Faye and Will turn to each other uneasily. "Can you still feel it?" Faye asks.

Will touches the back of his neck again and shakes his head. "No. Maybe it was just the wind?"

Neither of them are convinced, but it's certainly better than the alternative.

"Yeah," says Faye. "Maybe."

Author's note: Hi everyone! I hope you're enjoying the story so far. I really wanted to fit another event into this chapter (something the show only touches on, but that will be a crucial plot point for this story), however including it would have pushed the word count over 3,000 - which I'm trying to avoid. Guess it will just have to wait...

3. Scandal alert

"Suzie, this is Dustin - do you copy? Over."

...

"Suzie, this is your Dustin - do you copy? Over."

...

"Suzie-"

"Dustin come on!" Max finally snaps. "She's not there!"

Faye starts awake at the sound of Max's voice, having been dozing on Will's shoulder. When she closed her eyes, the sky was blossoming into a burnt orange, and now it's a star-flecked navy blue.

Dustin scowls at Max. "She's there alright! She'll pick up!"

"Maybe Cerebro doesn't work?" says Will.

"Or maybe Suzie doesn't exist," Lucas asserts.

"She exists!" Dustin snaps, affronted.

Lucas scoffs. "She's a genius, *and* she's hotter than Phoebe Cates? No girl is that perfect."

Max sits bolt upright. "Is that so?"

The color slowly drains from Lucas' face. "I-I mean, *you're* perfect! That is, perfect in your own way - in your own special way."

"You guys believe me, don't you?" Dustin asks Faye and Will.

"Yeah," Faye answers, a little too quickly. "Of course we believe you, don't we?"

Will nods. "Yeah, for sure."

"They're just being polite!" Lucas accuses.

"Come on," says Max, pulling her and Lucas to their feet.

"Where are you going?" Dustin demands.

"Home!" Max shouts as the two of them set off down the hill.

Dustin watches them go, then turns to Faye and Will. "Well, guess it's just Henderson, Byers, and Wheeler left standing."

The pair exchange awkward stares and Faye grimaces with guilt. "Actually, uh-

"- it's late," Will supplies, apologetically.

Dustin's face falls. "Oh, okay."

"Maybe tomorrow we can play D&D?" Will suggests.

"Yeah, sure," Dustin replies without enthusiasm.

Faye steps forward and gives him a hug. "It's good to have you back."

Bidding Dustin goodnight, Faye and Will walk hand-in-hand through the darkness, with only the distant lights of Hawkins as a guide. As soon as they're out of earshot, Faye groans. "I feel so bad!"

"I know," Will agrees. "Do you really think he made Suzie up?"

"No!" Faye answers, truthfully. "I think she exists... but maybe she's not *officially* Dustin's girlfriend? Maybe she's just a girl he met at camp that he has a crush on. I mean, no-one can miss *that* many radio calls unless they're ignoring you."

Faye adores Dustin, but he can come on a little strong at times. Usually, it's a good thing; Dustin is one of the best students at Hawkins Middle School because he works harder than anyone, and last year he stood up for Dart even when the rest of the Party hated him. Sure, Dart turned out to be a Demodog who nearly killed them all, but that's besides the point. When Dustin cares about something, he gives it everything he's got. However, when it comes to girls, Faye can see how this attitude might put a person off. Like when he used an entire can of hairspray at the Snowball to impress Max (although

in fairness, that was mostly Steve's fault).

"Well hopefully tomorrow we can take his mind off it - I've been working on a new campaign for weeks," says Will excitedly.

"Yeah, hopefully." Despite the fact they're alone, Faye lowers her voice before speaking again. "About earlier, d'you really think it was just the wind that gave you a bad feeling?"

Will's smile falters. "I don't know. It was the same thing I felt in the movie theatre. One minute I was fine, and then out of nowhere the hairs on the back of my neck stood up and everything went cold."

The skin of Faye's neck prickles uncomfortably in response. "Should we tell the others?"

"No!" Will answers immediately, startling her. "I mean, it was just a feeling. I didn't *see* anything, so we don't know for sure it had to do with the Upside Down."

Faye bites her tongue to silence the protest on her lips. She doesn't want to push him, but if there's even a chance the Mind Flayer is back or the Gate is open again - they can't ignore it. Will has felt this 'cold presence' twice now; and the first time just happened to coincide with a blackout that shut down the entire town?

Noticing her reaction, Will sighs. "All I'm saying is I don't want to make a big deal about it unless we're sure. The last thing I need is everyone treating me like a baby again. My mom has only just stopped bursting in on me when I'm peeing."

Faye tries to stifle a laugh and fails miserably after a few seconds. Will bumps her shoulder, but he's grinning too. "Okay," Faye states once she has caught her breath. "We won't say anything to the others, on one condition."

"What?"

"You always tell me, no matter what. Even if it's just a feeling - deal?"

Will halts in his tracks and pulls Faye towards him, catching her around the waist. The way he's smiling at her makes Faye's entire

chest swell with warmth. "Of course I'll tell you. No more secrets, remember?"

Faye leans up and kisses him.

After collecting their bikes from Dustin's house, the pair walk down Maple Street to the Wheeler residence, where Will gives her a final goodnight kiss before heading home. The lights are still on when Faye walks through the front door, and she can hear her dad's snores from the living room. Faye wonders whether her mom asked him to wait up and make sure she and Mike got home safely, and instead he fell asleep in front of the TV. If so, that's another argument waiting to happen. Not wanting to get caught in the crossfire, Faye decides to go straight to bed, but just as she's heading upstairs she runs into someone going the opposite way.

"Mom?"

Mrs. Wheeler freezes mid-step. "Hi sweetie. Did you have a good day?"

Faye is too stunned by her mom's appearance to answer the question. Mrs. Wheeler is wearing a chic red dress with a fitted waist, matching bright red lipstick, and a pair of elegant white heels - all of which appear to be brand new.

"Where are you going?" Faye asks.

"Nowhere," Mrs. Wheeler says in a strangely high-pitched voice. "I-I mean nowhere special. Just going to meet Jill for a drink."

"Oh. How come you're so dressed up?"

Mrs. Wheeler laughs nervously. "I'm not dressed up, am I? Just you know, making an effort."

Faye frowns - isn't it supposed to be the mom who interrogates the teenager, not the other way around?

"How was Dustin's going away party?" Mrs. Wheeler asks, changing the subject.

"You mean welcome home party?"

"Oh, right yeah," she says distractedly. "You know, I think I forgot something upstairs. And hey - you should be in bed, missy."

Faye holds her hands up. "I'm going, I'm going."

When she gets to her room, Mike's bed is empty - which Faye would usually be glad of, but right now she wishes she could talk to him about what just happened. Mrs. Wheeler is a terrible liar, she obviously isn't going to meet Jill. The question is, *who* is she meeting; at this time of night, looking like she just stepped off the cover of Vogue?

Suddenly, Faye remembers what Will said about his dad the other day. How he started staying out late just before he and Ms. Byers got divorced. A horrible sinking feeling plucks at her chest. What if her mom is... *going on a date*?!

No... no way. It can't be. Faye shakes her head and tells herself she's overreacting. Her mom is *married* for God's sake! Just because she and Mr. Wheeler are fighting more than usual doesn't mean she's going to run off with another man. In an effort to put these thoughts out of her mind, Faye changes into her pajamas and goes to brush her teeth. On her way back from the bathroom, she passes her parents' bedroom and finds the door slightly ajar.

Mrs. Wheeler is sitting at the dresser with her head in her hands. She looks upset and Faye's first instinct is to comfort her, but a sudden idea keeps her rooted to the spot. Out of respect for their privacy, Faye makes a point never to read her family or her friends' minds. If the situation were reversed, she definitely wouldn't want them reading *her* mind; but on the other hand, if her mom really is going on a date, then maybe her parents are getting divorced for real. In which case, she has a right to know.

Faye lingers in the doorway wrestling with her conscience, until eventually curiosity wins out. Taking a deep breath, she closes her eyes and extends her arm. There's a ringing sound followed by a sharp tugging sensation in the pit of her stomach, and when Faye opens them again she's in the black void.

In front of her are two figures, one of which is her mom. She's wearing a blue and pink bathing suit and talking to a lifeguard in red shorts. They're standing close together and talking in hushed voices, as if they don't want to be overheard. Wait a minute... that's Billy. Max's brother Billy! Faye remembers seeing him at Hawkins Community Pool when they all went swimming a couple of weeks ago.

"Shall we say tonight? Eight o'clock?" Billy asks.

Mrs. Wheeler hesitates, then shakes her head. *"I'm sorry, I can't."*

"Can't what? Have fun?"

Faye's confusion grows by the minute. What are they talking about? Why would her mom and Billy, of all people, be arranging to meet up?

"I just don't think I need any lessons," Mrs. Wheeler replies.

Billy smirks and leans closer to her. *"Oh, you see - I think you do. I just don't think you've had the right teacher."*

This makes even less sense. What is Billy Hargrove qualified to give lessons in - how to be a sleazeball? Mrs. Wheeler bites her lip and giggles, and all of a sudden Faye realises how naive she's being.

"It will be the workout of your life," Billy promises.

Shivers of disgust sweep Faye's skin as if a bucket of cold slime has been poured over her head. Not wanting to hear another word, she breaks the connection with a jolt and finds herself back outside her parents' bedroom. Wiping the blood on her sleeve, Faye runs back to her room and slams the door.

For a few minutes, she's too shocked to think straight. Did that really just happen? Faye grabs fistfuls of her hair and squeezes her eyes shut, hoping - *pleading* - that this is all a nightmare and she's still asleep on Will's shoulder in the field. When it becomes clear this isn't the case, Faye sits on the edge of her bed and tries to calm down, but ends up springing to her feet again and pacing back and forth in agitation.

Her mom is having an affair. And not only that - she's having an affair with *Billy Hargrove*! Max's brother, who is *eighteen years old*. That's the same age as Nancy! Faye can't decide what grosses her out more; the affair, the age gap, or the fact it's Billy. Faye always knew he was an asshole, but she didn't think even he would stoop this low. What if they've kissed, or worse... what if they've had *sex*?!

The thought is so repulsive it makes her physically gag. What should she do? Should she confront her mom? Should she tell her dad? Should she just pretend it didn't happen?

Suddenly, the sound of tyres screeching diverts Faye's attention. She peers through the window and sees Mike exiting Hopper's cruiser. The second Mike is clear of the vehicle, Hopper spins around in the middle of the street and the cruiser speeds back the way it came. Feeling a surge of relief, Faye rushes downstairs, but when Mike walks through the door he hardly seems to notice her.

"Mike-

"Not now," he grumbles.

"I need to talk to you-

Sighing impatiently, Mike pushes past her. "I don't need another lecture on me and El sneaking off."

Faye follows him upstairs. "It's not that, it's-

"I don't care what it is!"

"Will you just listen for five seconds, this is important-

"I SAID NOT NOW!" Mike yells, slamming the bedroom door in her face. Seething, Faye debates whether to burst in and force him to listen, but in the end she settles for banging her fist against the wood.

What the hell is his problem?! First of all, that's not *his* room it's *their* room - so he can't just throw Faye out. Secondly, whatever is causing him to have a tantrum like a five year old isn't Faye's fault. Maybe he had a fight with El, but even so, after that behaviour Faye can't bring herself to care. Fine - if he's going to act like an asshole then screw

him.

Stomping back downstairs, Faye heads into the basement and sits on the couch, trying to figure out what to do now. There's no way she's going to be able to sleep without talking to someone about her mom and Billy. It feels as if there's a swarm of angry bees inside her that are anxious to get out. Faye desperately wants to call Will, but it's way too late for that and the radio signal doesn't reach his house. She could try Lucas (he's the only person in range), but he would end up telling Max and Faye doesn't think she'd be able to look her in the eye afterwards.

On the edge of her vision, Faye spots the table El slept under when they first found her in the woods, and an idea springs to mind. Faye switches on the TV and fiddles with the dials until there's nothing but the gentle hum of interference, then she rolls a napkin into a makeshift blindfold and ties it around her eyes. El is much better at this than Faye, but it's still worth a shot.

For the second time that evening, Faye finds herself in the black void. "El? El, it's me. Can you hear me?"

At first there's no answer, and Faye is about to call out again when a voice comes from behind her.

"Faye?"

Turning on the spot, Faye sees El standing in front of her and she lets out a breath she didn't realise she was holding.

"El! Thank God!"

"Is your nana okay?" El asks, concerned.

"My nana?" Faye frowns.

"Hopper said she was sick."

"What? No she's not."

El's eyebrows knit together. "Then why would he say that?"

"I don't know, but listen - I really need to talk to you," Faye asserts.
"It's about my mom-"

"Is she sick, too?"

"No! No-one's sick! She's..."

Faye has been dying to tell someone all evening, but now she can't seem to get the words out. Swallowing thickly, her voice drops to a whisper.

"She's having an affair."

El just blinks in confusion. "What's an affair?"

"It's when a person cheats on their boyfriend or girlfriend, or husband and wife in this case," Faye explains, with a tinge of bitterness.

"Why would she do that?"

"Because she's not happy with my dad I guess, but that's not the worst part."

"What's the worst part?" El questions nervously.

Faye cringes as the images flash through her head again. "It's with Billy."

"*Billy?!!*" El exclaims, eyes bulging. Faye can only nod in response.

El pulls the same face she did when Faye and Max told her where babies come from. "Ew."

"Exactly. What do I do?!" Faye yelps.

There's a brief pause before El answers. "You should tell the truth."

"To who?"

"Your mom."

"I can't!" Faye insists. "I only found out because I read her mind and I can't tell her that!"

"Then, tell Mike?" El suggests.

Faye scoffs. "I tried but he was in full bitch-mode when he got home... did you two fight or something?"

A flicker of doubt passes across El's expression, but she shakes her head. "No. Hopper said your nana was sick then drove Mike home."

Before Faye can question her about the nana story, El glances over her shoulder. "I have to go."

"Okay," says Faye, somewhat reluctantly.

"We can talk more tomorrow," El promises.

The girls share a smile before Faye closes her eyes and allows herself to be pulled back to reality. Removing the blindfold, Faye flops onto the couch and notes that there are no longer bees in her stomach. She feels much better after speaking to El, even though she still doesn't know what to do. Just getting it off her chest will suffice for tonight.

When Faye creeps back upstairs and enters her room, Mike is already in bed facing the wall, which is his "leave me alone" position. Glad to oblige, Faye shoots him a dirty look before getting into her own bed and praying that her mom and Billy don't make their way into her nightmares.

Author's note: Apologies for the delay in updating, I've been a bit busy. Thank you to everyone who left lovely reviews - I read them all and they make my day! Let me know what you think of chapter 3!

4. Warring Wheelers

The next morning, Faye wakes up early and can't get back to sleep, so she decides to get out of the house for a while. It's barely light outside, and the sky is a creamy pink color - like an overripe peach about to split - but she feels restless, and maybe the fresh air will clear her head. Besides, after last night, Faye is determined to avoid running into her mom. At least until she's figured out what to do about the Billy situation - the thought of which still sends shudders racing up her spine.

As she creeps downstairs (hopping over the creaky step three from the bottom - a tip she learned from Nancy), Faye wonders whether it's too early to bike to Will's house. Melvald's General Store where Ms. Byers works opens at 7AM, so she'd be gone by the time Faye got there - and Jonathan has that summer internship with Nancy at the Hawkins Post. Which means she could tell Will what she saw without the risk of anyone overhearing. Just as Faye is heading to the garage to retrieve her bike, a thought enters her mind that halts her mid-step.

Maybe she shouldn't be going to Will's house, maybe she should go to Max's house first. Billy is Max's brother after all, and if word gets out that he's been having an affair with a married woman twice his age, God knows what it will do to Max's home life. From what little she's told the group, Max's step-father (Billy's dad) has an even nastier temper than his son; and Faye is willing to bet he wouldn't take kindly to his family being involved in a scandal like that in a small town like Hawkins. If the situation were reversed, Faye would want Max to come to her, so it's only fair she does the same.

With her mind made up, Faye goes to open the front door when Mike thunders down the stairs, still in his pajamas, and leaps in front of her. "Where are you going?"

Faye jumps back, startled by his sudden appearance. "To Max's - not that it's any of your business. What's wrong with you?"

Ignoring the question, Mike fixes her with an expression of urgency. "If you see El, our Nana is sick."

"What?"

He speaks in a slow voice, as if addressing a child. "If you see El and she asks, tell her that Nana is sick and I'm spending the day with her."

"Is Nana sick?"

"No."

Faye narrows her eyes in suspicion. "So you're asking me to lie?"

A flicker of pain passes over Mike's face. "There's a good reason, I promise-"

"I don't care," Faye interrupts, trying to step around him. "If you want to lie to El that's on you, but don't get me involved."

Mike puts his hands together pleadingly. "Just do it! As a favor to me."

"Oh *now* you want me to do you a favor after you slammed the door in my face last night?" Faye snaps.

"I'm sorry! I was in a bad mood-"

"No shit." Faye reaches past him to clutch at the handle, but Mike grabs her wrists. They struggle against each other; Faye yanking her arms free of Mike's hold, only for him to catch them again before she can get to the door.

"*Goddammit, let go of me!*"

"*Just say you'll tell her!*"

"*No!*"

"*Please!*"

Eventually, Faye has no option but to resort to dirty tactics and bites down hard on Mike's hand. A stream of expletives fly from his mouth as Mike releases his grip on Faye's arms, which gives her just enough

time to slip out the front door and pull it shut behind her. Huffing in exasperation, Faye straightens out her rumpled clothes and wonders what the hell has gotten into her brother lately. If she didn't have somewhere important to be (and if Mike hadn't just attacked her for no good reason), she might have gone back inside and tried to talk to him. As it is, Faye has her own problems to deal with, and she's just about to set off for Max's house when a bell chimes and none other than Will cycles up to the driveway.

"Hey!" Faye exclaims in surprise. "What're you doing here so early?"

"Thought I'd better leave plenty of time to set up," says Will as he dismounts his bike, grinning broadly.

Faye blinks at him. "Huh?"

"D&D! I told you last night about the campaign I've been working on."

It's only now that Faye registers the large box Will is carrying, which appears to be full of props.

"Oh, right." Faye had completely forgotten about D&D. "Why don't you guys start without me. I have to go see Max."

Will's smile falters. "Can't you see her another time? We're supposed to be cheering up Dustin, remember?"

"I know, but this is really important."

Faye so badly wants to tell him - the words feel as if they're burning a hole through her tongue. She wants Will to wrap his arms around her and say that they'll figure it out, that everything will be okay, because if Will says so then it must be true. But she promised herself she would tell Max first.

"I'll explain everything later."

The frown that settles on Will's face is halfway between confusion and concern, but in the end he just shrugs. "Okay."

"Thank you," says Faye, squeezing his hand gratefully.

"I'll save the good quests for when you get back."

Faye smiles and leans in to press her lips against his in a brief but heartfelt kiss, then hurries down the drive before there are any more distractions.

Max's house is off Old Cherry Road, which is roughly a 20 minute walk from the Wheeler residence. Despite the early hour (although the pink sky has now bleached into a crisp blue), there's a fair amount of traffic on the roads, and Faye passes several groups laden with beach towels and inflatable rings on their way to the pool. No sooner does the observation enter her mind does it transform into an image of Billy in his red swimming shorts and Mrs. Wheeler giggling and leaning into his body-

"Ugh!" Faye cries, shaking her head in disgust. "Go away!"

An old woman tending to her garden looks up in alarm at Faye's outburst, water sloshing wildly from her watering can. Faye flushes and turns hastily into the next street, willing the image out of her head. Sure, she can control other people's minds - but she can't stop her own mind from conjuring up horrors like *that*. Some superpower...

By the time Faye reaches Max's neighborhood, she still has no idea what she's going to say. *'Hey Max, what's up? Just dropped by to let you know that your brother is going at it with my mom.'* It suddenly dawns on Faye that Max might not *want* to hear what she has to say. What if she doesn't believe her? What if she gets angry, or upset? Or worse, what if it makes things really awkward between them and Max doesn't want to be her friend anymore? Perhaps Faye should have thought this through properly instead of racing straight over here... Perhaps she should have told Will first after all, since he's the voice of reason in the group. Perhaps-

"Faye?"

Faye nearly jumps out of her skin. Up ahead, Max is outside with her skateboard (which Faye should have anticipated) and now she's coming over. *Shit shit shit!*

"Hi!" Faye squeaks as Max rolls up beside her.

"Hey!" Max beams, flipping the skateboard into her hand with a single movement. "What're you doing here?"

Come on, Faye. Words. "Uhh, I uh... was just in the neighborhood."

"Oh, how come? You live right across town," Max points out.

Faye mentally facepalms. "I just... felt like going for a walk"

Max gives her a strange look. "Okay. Is everything alright? You seem... weird."

Taking a deep breath, Faye decides the best thing to do is cut to the chase. There's no good way to say it, so she might as well just get it over with. "Well, actually no. I need to tell you something-"

"Hi."

Faye and Max turn around in surprise. "El?"

El is standing behind them, having seemingly materialised out of nowhere. Faye is so thrown by the sight of her that it takes a moment to notice the way El's shoulders are hunched, and the nervous hesitation in her voice. "Can we talk?"

"You as well? What am I missing here?" Max asks, glancing between Faye and El.

Ten minutes later, all three girls are in Max's bedroom; Faye and El perched on the edge of the bed, and Max pacing thoughtfully in front of them. It turns out Mike's weird behaviour the last couple of days wasn't Faye's imagination. She and Max listen intently while El recounts how one minute everything was normal, and now she feels like Mike is avoiding her. Faye finds this difficult to believe, given they've spent the past six months attached at the hip - or the mouth, more accurately.

"So what, he just blew you off?" asks Max.

"He says his nana is sick," El replies, turning to Faye. "Is she?"

El and Max look at her expectantly while Faye's moral compass spins itself into a frenzy - does she snitch on her brother, or lie to her friend? Mike didn't even tell her why he's pretending Nana is sick; if he really wanted Faye to cover for him, he should have at least offered an explanation. More to the point, Faye doesn't think she could bring herself to lie to El, even if there is a good reason.

"No, she's not."

El's face falls. "Then... he lied."

"But why would he do that?" Faye wonders.

"Because he's a piece of shit."

The others glance at Max in shock. "No offence, I know he's your brother," Max continues. "But first he lies then he blows El off? That's bullshit."

Faye shakes her head. "I just don't get *why* he would lie."

"He's probably goofing off with the guys. I guarantee you him and Lucas are playing Atari right now!" Max insists.

"But friends don't lie," says El.

Max grimaces. "Yeah well, *boyfriends* lie. All the time."

"Will doesn't."

Faye meets Max's gaze defiantly, even when the redhead raises her eyebrows in challenge. "I know Will's a nice guy, but he's still a *guy*. He's probably just better at hiding it than Mike or Lucas."

It's not a pleasant thought, but the matter-of-factness of Max's tone chases Faye's objection back down her throat.

"So, should I call him?" El asks.

Faye and Max answer at the same time.

"Yes."

"No."

They swing around to face each other.

"She can't let him get away with lying! She should call and demand he tell her the truth," Faye reasons.

Max waves this off. "I've tried that before with Lucas, he'll just lie more to get out of it. There's only one way to handle this - do nothing."

A bemused silence lingers in the wake of this announcement. Moving to sit between them on the bed, Max begins listing off points on her fingers. "You don't call Mike, you don't see him, you don't even think about him. As far as you're concerned, he doesn't exist."

"Doesn't exist?" El repeats, sounding unsure.

Max nods. "He treated you like garbage! You should treat him like garbage - give him a taste of his own medicine."

Faye doesn't understand the logic behind this - Mike and El can't just ignore each other forever. When she and Mike fight, there's usually lots of yelling, swearing and door slamming until their mom breaks it up, but a few hours later they'll be watching TV together like nothing happened. Then again, brother-sister fights are different to boyfriend-girlfriend fights, and Faye has never fought with Will so she can't really comment. Whereas Max and Lucas fight all the time, so it stands to reason that Max knows more on the subject.

"There's more to life than stupid boys you know. Speaking of..." Max angles herself towards Faye. "What was it you wanted to tell me earlier?"

Faye's stomach sinks. There's no use putting it off any longer. "Well... okay, don't hate me, but last night I caught my mom sneaking out of the house, and I figured something weird was going on. So I read her mind and..."

Max stares at her and Faye can see the growing apprehension in her eyes.

"...I think she's having an affair with Billy."

"*What?!*" Max exclaims, her eyebrows flying into her hair.

"You think or you know?" El asks.

Reluctantly, Faye recounts every detail of her vision from the night before while Max and El listen in stunned silence. When she's finished, Max just gazes blankly at the floor. "I don't even know what to say. I can't believe he would do that. Well, actually I can but I didn't think he would - not with my friend's *mom*."

"I don't know what to do," Faye says anxiously. "Should we tell someone? Should we confront them?"

Max gets to her feet and begins pacing again. "Okay, let's think about this. You didn't actually see them..." she trails off, her face twisting in revulsion. "...*together*."

"No!" Faye shrieks, suddenly thankful she skipped breakfast this morning - otherwise it would have certainly made a re-appearance just now.

"Then maybe it's not an affair. Maybe it was just a one-time thing?" Max suggests. "That's usually how Billy's dates go, anyway."

Faye hadn't considered this. Somehow, the idea of it being just a one-off (while still gross) wasn't nearly as bad as a full-blown affair. Maybe her mom changed her mind, and that's why she didn't go out last night after all?

"Hop says grown-ups can make mistakes too," El states.

"Maybe you're right," Faye admits.

Max nods. "I don't think your mom would be stupid enough to have an affair with someone like Billy. Maybe it was just, what is it my mom calls it? A mid-life crisis?"

Faye lets this all sink in, and the more she thinks about it the more it makes sense. The ache of worry clamped around her chest seems to suddenly loosen - like a padlock springing open - and she sighs in

relief. Whatever her mom's reasons were for meeting up with Billy, Faye doesn't need nor want to know. As long as it was just a one-off, it will do more harm than good to blab about it. In the grand scheme of things, after everything that's already happened - what's one more secret to keep?

"Come on," Max announces, grabbing Faye and El's hands and pulling them up. "We're going out."

"Where?" Faye asks.

"After that conversation, I think we all need a little retail therapy."

El frowns. "Retail therapy?"

Max laughs as she leads them out the door. "Shopping of course!"

5. Material Girl

Despite the fact Faye has spent virtually every weekend at Starcourt Mall since it opened, she's never actually *shopped* there before. Most of her visits have comprised of going to the movie theatre, getting ice cream at Scoops Ahoy, or playing on the arcade machines. Truth be told, Faye could probably count on one hand the number of times she's been shopping in her entire life.

"What do you think?" Max grins as she, Faye and El stand in front of the main entrance. El, who has never been to Starcourt (or indeed any mall) before, shifts uncomfortably.

"What's wrong?" Faye asks.

"Too many people, against the rules," says El, staring at the constant stream of shoppers flowing in and out of the revolving doors.

The same thought did occur to Faye on the bus ride over. Hopper would lose his mind if he knew El was not only out in public, but in one of the busiest spots in Hawkins. And yet, it's been over six months since Hawkins Lab was shut down - and no-one has come looking for El. She can't stay cooped up in that cabin forever.

Max lowers her voice. "Seriously? You guys have superpowers - what's the worst that could happen?"

El glances at Faye uncertainly, and Faye just shrugs. "She has a point. It's a mall, not a minefield."

Seemingly reassured by this, El takes a deep breath and nods, which is all the encouragement Max needs to grab Faye's hand (who in turn grabs El's) and charge inside. The trio sprint down the escalators and emerge into the main foyer, Faye and El following Max's lead. El's mouth falls open in awe as she cranes her neck and turns on the spot, taking it all in. She almost bumps into an Orange Julius employee and sends his tray of free juice samples flying, but Faye pulls her out of the way. When Max asks what they want to do first, the others just stare at her blankly.

"Have you guys seriously never been shopping before?!"

El shakes her head.

"I've been shopping with my mom, and Nancy let me come with her and Barb once," says Faye. She's pretty sure neither of these instances count, particularly as Nancy only took Faye shopping because Mrs. Wheeler made her.

Max's face lights up with excitement. "Well then, I guess we're going to have to try everything!"

The first store they come to is The Gap, and Faye has to squint against its gleaming red linoleum floor. There are racks upon racks of clothes everywhere she looks; shirts, pants, dresses, shorts, skirts - all in a vibrant array of colors. Next to the counter, a sign proclaiming 'Summer Essentials' in bold lettering hangs over shelves piled with bathing suits, sunglasses, flip-flops and other seasonal items beyond counting. Faye doesn't know exactly what she's looking for, so she chooses a display at random and begins sifting through the hangers.

"What kind of things do you like?" asks Max.

Faye grimaces. "I don't really know, I guess I mostly wear jeans and shirts."

"You gotta think bigger than that!" Max laughs. "Do you like pastels or darks? Long sleeves or short sleeves? Spots or stripes?"

"Uhhhh," Faye stammers, having never considered any of these questions before. "Nancy mostly wears prints, and she always looks good."

There's a hint of bitterness in Faye's voice, which doesn't go unnoticed by Max. This kind of stuff has always come so easily to Nancy; whatever she wears seems to enhance her natural beauty without any real effort on her part. Hell, she could go out in a potato sack and probably still look pretty. Whereas Faye has always been 'one of the guys'; why bother trying to look nice when you'll just end up covered in bike grease, or getting into a food fight with Dustin, or wrestling in the grass with Mike?

"You shouldn't try to dress like Nancy, you should dress like you," Max insists. "Plus, no offence to Nancy - but I think you're way prettier."

"Oh please," Faye mumbles, embarrassed.

"It's true! And Will obviously agrees with me!" Max singsongs, giggling loudly when Faye whacks her with the nearest available item.

Behind them, El wanders from rack to rack running her fingers over all the different materials, her eyes wide with amazement. Eventually, she comes to a stop in front of a mannequin sporting a bright blue shirt embellished with artful streaks of red, white and yellow. It's a stark contrast to the subdued, baggy shirts (many of which are hand-me-downs from various members of the group) she usually wears.

Max turns to her. "Do you like that?"

El glances between Max and the shirt. "How do I know what I like?"

"You just try things on until you find something that feels like you," Max explains.

"Like me?"

"Yeah. Not Hopper, not Mike, not Nancy," Max adds, shooting a reproachful look at Faye. "Like you."

Over the next few hours, the girls go from shop to shop modelling clothes - and Faye can't remember the last time she had this much fun. Within minutes, her eyes are streaming and her stomach aches from laughing so hard. In the fourth or fifth store (Faye loses count of how many they've been to), she spots a mannequin that stands out from the rest. The outfit consists of a pair of pale denim shorts, a white shirt with rolled-up sleeves and a colored pattern, over a fitted black bustier. Faye can't stop staring at it, and before she knows what's happening Max is bundling fabrics into her arms and ushering her towards the changing rooms. Faye swaps her old clothes for the new items, then turns to the mirror. Everything fits perfectly; the

shorts are just the right length, the shirt is cool, and Faye notes that she doesn't even need to stuff her bra with the bustier. Her mom would say it's "too grown up" and "not appropriate", but Faye is nearly fifteen now - she's not a kid anymore.

"Come on, let us see!" Max calls.

Faye draws back the curtain and twirls on the spot. "Well?"

Max and El are gaping at her and Faye hesitates, not knowing whether this is good or bad.

"You look awesome!" Max exclaims.

"Bitchin'" El agrees. She herself has changed into a black playsuit covered in multi-colour swirls, which both Faye and Max have already requested to borrow.

Faye flushes and looks back at the mirror, humming thoughtfully. "I feel like it's missing something."

El disappears onto the shop floor and returns holding a black belt with small silver studs. "This?"

Faye loops it through the shorts, and five minutes later walks out of the shop a different person to the one who walked in. For the first time in her life, she feels confident in a way not even her powers have ever made her feel. They might just be clothes, but they've given Faye a sense of control over herself that she's never truly had before. An identity outside of her siblings, her friends, and even Will - something that is Faye and Faye alone. As she glances at El, Faye sees that same confidence reflected in her friend's eyes, and she knows El is feeling the exact same thing.

In the next store, the trio decide to try on some high heels and end up clumsily tottering all over the place before falling in a heap on the floor, cackling like hyenas. A derisive snort draws their attention to the other side of the room, where Stacey Albright and her gang of airheads (which now includes Jennifer Hayes, Faye notes with a ripple of loathing) are glowering at them. Faye and El look at each other and smirk. In a strange coincidence, Stacey and Jennifer's sodas

spontaneously explode later that afternoon just as Faye, Max and El are passing by.

Only when Faye realises she has spent her entire monthly allowance in one day do the girls decide to head home, after a final stop at Scoops Ahoy. Faye can barely fit through the revolving doors with the number of bags clutched in her arms.

"Can we go shopping every day?" El asks through a mouthful of vanilla ice cream.

Faye laughs. "At this rate, I'll be broke before Thanksgiving."

"The malls in California are even bigger than this, maybe I can get my mom to take us there," says Max. "Wanna trade?"

Faye passes her chocolate cone to El, who gives Max the vanilla one, who in turn hands her strawberry cone to Faye. Suddenly, Max looks up and her expression darkens. "Oh you've gotta be shitting me."

Turning around, Faye sees Mike, Lucas and Will unchaining their bikes by the parking lot, and a sense of foreboding settles over her. Like when you hear the first distant rumbles of thunder and you know a hell of a storm is coming.

"Isn't this a nice surprise?" Max announces.

The boys freeze and their eyes bulge comically as they take in the sight of Max, Faye and El. When Mike sees El, the guilt on his face quickly dissolves into anger and his bike clatters to the ground. "What are you doing here?!"

"Shopping," says El, curtly.

"This is her new style, what do you think?" Max asks.

Ignoring the question, Mike glares at Faye and Max accusingly. "What's wrong with you?! You know she's not allowed to be here."

Max scowls. "What is she your little pet?"

"Yeah, am I your pet?" El demands.

"What, no-"

"Then why do you treat me like garbage?"

Mike's mouth opens and closes but no words come out, so El continues.

"You said Nana was sick."

"She is!" Mike insists.

"Faye says she isn't."

If looks could kill, Faye would have been struck down clean by the furious stare Mike shoots her. As it is, Faye just stares right back. "Friends don't lie."

"Boyfriends lie," El sneers.

Mike's voice heightens in panic and words pour out of his mouth in a crazed babble. "I wasn't lying! I mean... We-we thought Nana was sick but it turns out she's not! So we came here to do some shopping - not for us, for her. And also I wanted to get a gift for you, but we couldn't find anything that suited you and I only have like three dollars and fifty cents so it's hard."

"Super hard," Lucas agrees.

"Oh yeah, it's *so* hard to just be honest with your girlfriend!" says Max.

Mike pleads with El. "Can I talk to you alone?"

"No."

"Please, just five minutes. I can explain-"

The tenuous grip Faye has on her temper slips. "Just give it a rest Mike! You had your chance to explain earlier and instead you lied."

Mike whips around to face her, fury etched into his features. "What do you know about it?! And speaking of *lying*, you said you were

going to see Max today!"

"I was!" Faye snaps.

"So what, you just *happened* to end up at the mall with El?!"

Faye is about to respond when Will suddenly steps forwards. "You said it was important."

"It was!" says Faye, thinking about her mom and Billy.

To her surprise and dismay, Will scoffs. "So shopping is more important than playing D&D with us like you promised?"

Faye is so taken aback that her reply disintegrates on her tongue. Will's face is wrought with cold accusation, and he's never spoken to Faye like that before.

Max steps between them. "Don't talk to her like that. And actually, she did have something important to tell me."

"I wasn't talking to you, Max," says Will, unkindly.

"Can you just butt out of other people's relationships?" Mike adds.

Max stands her ground. "It's called supporting my friends when their boyfriends are being jackasses!"

"You're the only jackass here," Mike drawls.

"Hey! Don't call my girlfriend a jackass!" says Lucas.

All of a sudden, everyone is yelling at each other. Accusations fly back and forth and voices raise to be heard above the clamor, to the point where the entire parking lot stops and stares at them. What started as a single disagreement has turned into a full-blown boys verses girls argument.

"STOP!"

El's scream cuts through the chaos and a tense silence follows. No-one seems to know what to say. Faye's heart is hammering in her chest

and the corners of her eyes sting with tears, but she blinks them away.

Eventually, El glances at Mike. "You lie."

Mike at least has the decency to look ashamed.

"Why do you lie?"

When he doesn't answer, El walks right up to him and for a minute Faye thinks she's going to shove the ice cream in his face. "I dump your ass!"

There's a collective gasp of shock. El spins on her heel and walks off, leaving Mike staring after her in disbelief. Max soon follows suit, and Faye is left alone with the boys. Mike - still reeling from the breakup - barely notices her, Lucas is rubbing the bridge of his nose the way he does when he's stressed, but Will is looking right at her. His expression is predominantly angry, but there's hurt too - Faye can see it in his eyes.

Part of her wants to take him aside and say she's sorry, that she never meant to skip out on D&D and simply lost track of time. And yet, a bigger part of her can't believe that Will would think she ditched them on purpose. Doesn't he trust her? After everything they've been through? Apparently not... The realisation pierces her like an ice pick to the heart.

Faye turns away and follows El and Max.

Author's note: I had a free weekend so I managed to get two chapters finished - yay! Let me know what you think, as always.

6. Cabin in the Woods

The girls take the bus to the outskirts of town, then walk the rest of the way to Hopper's cabin. Faye knows the boys will have ended up back at her house, so there's no question of going home anytime soon. When Max suggests having a sleepover, Faye agrees before the words are fully out of her mouth.

"What's a sleepover?" asks El as they climb the porch steps.

"Where me and Faye sleep at your house," Max explains. "We stay up late, watch scary movies, do each other's hair and tell secrets."

El blinks. "What secrets?"

"Anything, the juicier the better!" Max grins.

"Juicier? Like orange juice?"

Faye laughs. "No like embarrassing stuff. Things you wouldn't want anyone else to know."

The kind of sleepovers Faye is accustomed to involve all-night D&D campaigns, *Ghostbusters* movie marathons, and fort-building in the Wheelers' basement. The closest she's ever been to Max's sleepover itinerary is when Dustin once got gum in her hair and Lucas and Will tried to cut it out with scissors, while Mike nearly wet himself laughing. Faye had gone to school with a bald patch for weeks and still hadn't quite forgiven Dustin for it.

As El flicks the lights on in the cabin, Faye's eyes are immediately drawn to the fireplace in the corner. It's currently unlit, but in her mind all she can see are flames blazing and writhing in the grate to try to burn the Mind Flayer out of Will. *This is where it happened* Faye thinks *This is where we tied Will to the bed and locked the doors and windows so that the heat couldn't escape. It was so hot we could barely breathe... And then he woke up...*

A chill rakes down Faye's spine and her chest suddenly feels too tight.

This is where he almost killed Will, almost killed all of us... But he didn't,

we stopped him. Together, we stopped him. This is where I kissed Will for the first time-

"Faye?"

Faye jumps, not realising she has neither moved nor spoken for several minutes. El and Max are looking at her with concern, and beads of sweat have started to collect on her palms.

"Are you okay?" Max asks.

"Yeah," Faye nods, wiping her hands on her new shorts. "I'm fine."

Fifteen minutes later, the three of them are listening to Madonna and flipping through magazines in El's bedroom. Max is dancing around the room singing into a hairbrush while El giggles at her, but Faye hardly notices. That flashback was so vivid she could have sworn it was real, like she was re-living it. Faye could almost feel the scalding waves rolling off the fire. Her skin still tingles unpleasantly; like when you grab something that's too hot and yank your hand away, but your fingers are already burned. A sudden urge to talk to Will surfaces (he'd understand, he was there too), but then Faye's heart sinks as she remembers...

She can't talk to Will - they're in the middle of a fight. The words just don't sit right in her mind. How can she and Will be fighting? In fourteen years, they've never fought. Maybe once or twice they've had a small disagreement, but not to the point where they stop talking to each other. Is this what having a boyfriend is like? Nancy says it's normal for couples to fight, but it doesn't *feel* normal. Not for her and Will.

Maybe Faye shouldn't have stormed off like that. Maybe she should have just talked to Will and explained. Maybe she should call him-

"Right Faye?"

Faye glances up. "Huh?"

"I was telling El that Mike is totally gonna come crawling back to her begging for forgiveness," Max reiterates.

"Oh," says Faye. "Yeah totally."

Max grins in triumph. "See! I guarantee you him and Lucas are wallowing in self-pity right now!"

Somehow, Faye doubts this; Mike and Lucas are probably sitting on the couch eating chips, but she nods and gives El a reassuring smile all the same. One thing is for sure, Mike will definitely try to win her back - Faye only wishes she knew why he lied to El in the first place. The conversation continues around her, but Faye can't stop thinking about Will, and after a while she excuses herself to use the phone.

El and Max probably think she's calling her mom (which she technically is, since she's dialling her home number), but Faye is desperately hoping that the boys did go back to her house, and that Will is still there. The line rings and rings and there's no answer. Faye fidgets impatiently; it's a weeknight, surely someone must be in.

"Come on, pick up," she mutters under her breath. Nothing. Faye hangs up and tries again, but has no luck.

Eventually, she replaces the receiver in defeat. The thought of cycling home occurs to her, then Faye remembers her bike is still in the garage. There's no way she could walk back at this time of night. Maybe Hopper could give her a ride when he gets in from work-

"Faye! You'd better get in here!" Max calls.

When Faye returns to the bedroom, both El and Max are sitting on the floor. The music has been turned off, and in its place is the quiet hiss of interference. El is blindfolded and a tiny trickle of blood has started to run from her nose.

"What's going on?" Faye asks, alarmed.

Max looks up at her. "We're spying on the boys."

"What?!" Faye shuts the door and kneels down beside El. "Why are you spying on them?"

"So we can see what they're doing," Max states, as if this is obvious.

Faye shifts uncomfortably. Something about spying on the boys doesn't feel right. When she used her powers to spy on her mom, she ended up seeing something she *really* didn't want to see. Faye opens her mouth to voice these concerns, but El beats her to it.

"I see them."

Max leans in eagerly. "What are they doing?"

"Eating," El replies.

Faye hesitates for a moment, but curiosity gets the better of her. "Is Will there?"

"Yes."

"Are they at my house?"

"Yes."

A ripple of anger courses through her. If they're home, why didn't they answer the phone?! There's a pause before El speaks again.

"They say we are species... emotion not logic."

"What?!" Faye and Max exclaim together.

So not only are they ignoring her calls, they're also bitching about her? Faye has half a mind to go home right this second - bike or no bike - and chokeslam them. Just as she is about to interrogate El further, the dark-haired girl suddenly rips the blindfold off.

"What happened?" Max asks worriedly.

Without warning, El bursts out laughing and doubles over onto the floor. Faye and Max look at each other in confusion, but the absurdity of the situation soon has them joining in. The girls are still wiping tears from their eyes when the door slams open and Hopper stumbles in; an almost empty wine bottle is clutched in his hand, and he can't seem to stand up without swaying to one side. When he spots Faye and Max, his expression passes through rage, surprise, and finally embarrassment in quick succession.

"Uh...sorry," he eventually mumbles. "I thought you were... nevermind."

"Mike's not here," says Max, in answer to Hopper's unasked question.

Hopper just nods then lingers awkwardly in the doorway.

"Faye and Max wanted to have a sleepover," El explains. "Is that okay?"

"Yeah... yeah... yeah. That's cool," Hopper responds, slurring his words the way Faye's dad does when he's had too much whiskey after Christmas dinner. "I'll... I'll just-"

Red-faced, Hopper gropes for the handle - missing twice - then pulls the door closed. The trio turn to each other and burst out laughing all over again.

"Hey," Max announces once they've composed themselves. "I know what we can do."

She grabs a pen and paper from El's desk and an empty Coke bottle lying next to the trash, and starts to tear the paper into squares. Max writes something on each of the pieces, then arranges them in a circle and places the bottle in the middle.

"Spin the bottle!"

Faye raises her eyebrows. "Don't we need boys for that?"

"Not the kissing version, the spying version," Max clarifies. "Whoever the bottle lands on, El spies on."

There are seven pieces of paper with the names Nancy, Steve, Mr. Wheeler, Mrs. Wheeler, Dustin, Mr. Clarke, and Billy. Faye's eyes hover over the papers marked 'Mrs. Wheeler' and 'Billy' and she shudders.

"We could do it together," El suggests.

Faye looks at her. "What d'you mean?"

"You can spy too."

Max's face lights up. "Can you guys do that? Have visions at the same time?"

They've never tried it before, but it's possible. Faye shrugs. "I don't see why not."

"Awesome!" Max grins. "Okay, El you spin first."

El grabs the bottle and sends it whizzing around on its axis; it slows and then lands on Mr. Wheeler.

Faye groans reluctantly. "Unless you guys want to see him snoring in his chair, we should probably spin again."

A frown creases El's features. "Against the rules?"

"We make our own rules," Max states with an air of boldness.

This time, it's Faye's spin. The bottle careens round and round and Faye holds her breath, waiting to see where it will stop. It skids to a halt and points to the one name Faye was hoping wouldn't come up.

"Billy."

Max retrieves the radio and an extra blindfold for Faye. "Okay I should just warn you, if he's with a girl or doing something gross just get out of there right away before you're scarred for life."

Oh don't worry Faye thinks I'll be gone before you can say psychological trauma.

Faye and El move so that they're sitting opposite each other on the bed, then they each tie their blindfold in place.

"Ready?" asks El.

"Ready," Faye nods.

The two girls hold hands and Max turns up the interference on the radio. Faye exhales softly, relinquishing all sense of awareness apart

from the feeling of El's hands in her own. This time, there's no tugging sensation in the pit of her stomach; it's more of a short, sudden drop - like when you miss a step going down the stairs. When Faye opens her eyes, she has to squint against a blinding glare coming from her left.

El is standing in front of her, and they both turn towards the source of the light. A car is sitting in the middle of the black void with its headlights on full blast and the door open on the driver's side. As her eyes adjust, Faye also notices that the glass of the windshield is webbed with cracks, as if the car hit an animal or crashed into something on the side of the road.

Hand in hand, Faye and El approach the vehicle with caution; both uneasy, but both sensing a need to keep quiet. Faye knows nothing can hurt them in here - it's not a real place, it's just a vision - but that doesn't stop the hairs on the back of her neck standing up or her heart gathering speed in her chest. They bend down and peer inside, but there's no-one there. Faye spots a leather jacket strewn across the backseat and realises whose car it is; she glances at El, who seems to have had the same thought.

Suddenly, a muffled cry makes both girls jump. Spinning round in alarm, Faye finally finds the owner of the vehicle. Billy is kneeling down with his back to them about 30 feet away; he appears to be bending over something, and Faye can hear the deep rumble of his voice but can't quite make out the words. El tugs her forwards and they slowly move towards the crouched figure.

"Don't be afraid... it'll be over soon," Billy says. His voice has a strangely robotic quality, like it's devoid of any emotion.

As they get closer, the smothered sobs get louder. Faye identifies them as a girl's, and it sounds as if someone has gagged her or put a hand over her mouth. It also sounds as if she's extremely frightened.

"Just stay very still," Billy continues in his lifeless tone.

They've almost reached him now. Faye is shaking with every step, and she can feel El is too. All of a sudden, Billy stands up and Faye and El freeze on the spot, barely a foot behind him. Then Billy's head

snaps around.

There's an earsplitting scream and his eyes lock with Faye's. Panic erupts from Faye's chest like an electric shock, surging through her body to the tips of her toes. Billy is looking right at her and Faye *knows* that he can see her. Any second now he's going to grab her, to clamp his hand over her mouth like that other girl, but she can't run. She can't move at all.

Billy stares at her for another instant, and then he dissolves into wisps of cloud and is gone. The ground seems to fall out from under her and she's going with it-

"Faye!"

Faye tears the blindfold off. She hardly has time to register that she's back in the real world before El is flying into her arms. Faye grips her tightly, and she can feel the frantic pounding of El's heart matching her own.

"What is it?! What happened?!" Max demands.

Faye and El turn to each other, blood streaming from both of their noses, but it's a long time before either of them can find the words to describe what they've just seen.

7. Something Wicked This Way Comes

After the events of the spy session, Faye and El are in agreement that they need to find Billy. At the very least, it seemed like he was in some sort of car accident. Maybe the girl was involved too, maybe that's why she was screaming and sounded so scared - they could both be seriously hurt. That's one theory anyway, and the possibilities only get worse from there...

"If Billy was in a car accident, I would have heard by now," Max insists.

"Not if no-one has found him yet," Faye counters.

The three of them are walking through downtown Hawkins, heading for Max's neighborhood. Faye and El dragged her out of bed at first light before sneaking out of the cabin so as not to wake Hopper. Despite the fact it's early morning, it feels more like dusk thanks to the cluster of grey clouds hanging overhead - threatening to erupt into torrents of rain at any moment.

El turns to Max. "You don't believe us?"

"I believe you saw some super weird stuff," says Max. "But that's kind of Billy's deal - I mean, weird is normal for him."

"I'm more worried about the girl," Faye recalls. "It sounded like she was tied up or gagged or something."

Max blushes and her cheeks flush the same shade of red as her hair. "I told you he was into weird stuff."

El frowns. "But the screams?"

"Yeah I know but..." Max trails off, choosing her words carefully. "When Billy is alone with a girl, they make really crazy noises."

"They scream?" El asks, sceptically.

Max grimaces. "Yeah but like *happy* screams."

"Happy screams? What is *happy* screams?"

Sighing, Max shoots Faye a look that clearly says 'Help me out here, will you?' Faye knows what Max is referring to (she's heard Nancy and Jonathan making 'happy screams' enough times), but that definitely wasn't the case last night. The girl, whoever she is, was scared. And the way Billy looked at her - not through her, *at* her - was chilling. It's the only way Faye can think to describe it - as if the blood turned to ice in her veins.

They turn a corner and the Mayfield-Hargrove residence comes into view.

"His car's not here," Max observes. "You really wanna do this?"

Faye and El glance at each other and nod. Max takes a deep breath, resigning herself to the inevitable, then leads them inside.

The three most prominent features of Billy Hargrove's bedroom are Playboy posters, dirty laundry, and cigarette butts. There doesn't appear to be a single surface without at least one of these embellishments. Faye thought Mike was untidy, but this is a whole other level. The girls spend the next twenty minutes hunting through the chaos, trying to find something incriminating or unusual, and have no luck (well, they find lots of *unusual* stuff, but not the kind of usual they're after).

"Guys?" El calls from down the hall.

Faye and Max head into the bathroom and find El standing over a tub filled with water, in which several empty ice packets are floating.

"It's just ice," says Max, fishing one of them out. "It's probably for his muscles or something, he works out like a maniac."

A strange urge to touch the water overcomes Faye, and almost of its own accord her hand reaches out and dips into the tub. The result is instantaneous, but it's too late. Cold bites into Faye's skin like knives; it feels as if she's just stuck her fingers into a blender. A scream of agony rips from her throat and Faye stares at the water, waiting for it to run red with her blood.

"FAYE!"

Hands grab her shoulders and pull, and Faye topples backwards onto the cool tiles of the bathroom floor. Her breath comes in heavy pants and her entire body is shivering.

"What happened?!" El cries, kneeling in front of her.

Faye looks down at her hand and is shocked to see that she still has fingers. There's not so much as a cut, but it doesn't make sense. She *felt* her skin peeling open, splitting down to the bone...

Max shakes her gently. "Faye! Are you okay? Say something!"

There's a long pause before Faye speaks, and when she does her voice is hoarse, hardly more than a whisper. "He likes it cold."

El and Max are silent, and Faye can see her own terror etched into their faces. Out of the corner of her eye, she spots a flicker of red and turns to the cabinet under the sink. A dark stain by the handle stands out against the cream paint, and Faye crawls over and pulls it open. There's a trashcan on the bottom shelf and when Faye peers inside her heart clenches painfully, as if someone has just thrown a punch at her chest.

The others appear beside her as Faye lifts a bloody yellow whistle out of the trash. It dangles in front of them like a pendulum, swinging back and forth while the blood catches the light and glistens like a gruesome jewel. There's only one group of people in Hawkins who have yellow whistles - the lifeguards at the swimming pool.

"Holy shit," Max breathes.

"Now do you believe us?" asks Faye.

Max doesn't need to answer, the expression on her face speaks for itself. For a moment, the girls just stare at the whistle as if hypnotised. Inexplicably, Faye thinks of the cold presence that Will felt; first in the movie theatre, then on the field, and now this. A thought rises in her mind which she tries desperately to push away, but it won't budge.

What if it really is him?

The buzz of Faye's radio sends all three of them leaping out of their skin. *"Faye? Faye it's Mike - do you copy?"*

"Perfect timing," Faye mutters. She gingerly places the whistle on the counter, then retrieves her radio from the backpack in the hall.

"Faye this is serious, do you copy?"

"Yes I do, but I'm a little busy right now," Faye snaps.

"Is Will with you?"

The question throws her and Faye hesitates. "No, I thought he was with you?"

"He was but then he flipped out and left."

"What d'you mean he flipped out?"

"He's been weird ever since we got back from the mall. He kept bugging us about playing D&D, but me and Lucas didn't want to. And then he just sort of, lost it."

Faye struggles to keep the panic out of her voice. "Was it another episode?"

Mike exhales sharply on the other end and Faye can tell that he's pacing. *"No I don't think it's anything to do with that stuff, I think it's more... us."*

"Us?"

"The Party," Mike clarifies. *"He kept saying how everything's changing and we don't do the stuff we used to anymore, and now you two are fighting and I think he's just freaked out."*

The horror Faye was feeling five minutes ago is immediately forgotten. Eclipsed by a new, far more imperative concern. "Where is he?"

"I don't know, I guess his house?"

"I'll be there in 10 minutes."

Faye stuffs the radio into her bag before Mike has a chance to respond. How could she have been so stupid? She should have just talked to Will yesterday and explained everything. No wonder he's freaked out. And what if it's more than that? What if he felt the cold presence again? He wouldn't have wanted to say anything to Mike or Lucas... Regardless, Will needs her right now - fighting be damned.

"D'you have a bike I can borrow?" Faye asks, returning to the bathroom with one arm already in her jacket.

Max looks at her in surprise. "Uh, sure. Why?"

"I have to go."

"Go where?"

"I have to talk to Will."

"What about Billy?" says El.

Faye glances at her apologetically. "I'm sorry, I can't."

There's no time to explain. Everything else; Billy, the girl, the Mind Flayer... they'll all have to wait. Will is more important.

As Faye speeds down the street on Max's borrowed bike, the first rumble of thunder descends on Hawkins.

By the time she reaches the Byers' house, Faye is soaked to the skin. Rain gushes down in unrelenting sheets and the wind has bitten her cheeks into numbness. Every few minutes, the sky flashes white with lightning and the thunder has grown from distant grumbles to ferocious crashes; as if a vengeful deity is trying to crack the earth open.

Faye drops the bike in a puddle that could swallow a car and races up the porch steps. "Will!" she shouts, hammering on the door. "Will it's

me! Will!"

It's hard to hear over the storm, but Faye can't make out any footsteps inside. She presses her face against the dripping glass and can only see the dark outlines of furniture. Ms. Byers used to keep a spare key somewhere, but Faye is pretty sure she took it back after Will went missing. Leaping off the porch, she runs down the side of the house to see if anyone is home, and finds only unlit rooms and shuttered windows.

Suddenly, the answer hits her and Faye can't believe she didn't think of it in the first place. Where does Will go when he's angry or upset? Where did he hide from the Demogorgon in the Upside Down? Where did they talk about running away together just a few days ago, even though it now feels like a lifetime?

When Faye steps through the trees and into the clearing, her heart swells in relief at the gentle glow emanating from Castle Byers. She makes it two paces before the curtain is flung aside and Will emerges. It appears he got caught in the rain too; his hair is plastered to his forehead in a matted mess, and his clothes are drenched to the point where he's shivering. Faye aches with the need to take him in her arms and hold him.

And then Will produces a baseball bat and drives it through the roof of Castle Byers.

The wooden beams snap like twigs, spraying plumes of splinters while Faye watches in shock. "WILL!"

Another thunderclap devours her voice and Will just keeps swinging the bat over his head. *BANG*. The neatly stacked logs along the front wall tumble down. *BANG*. The roof supports crunch in half and collapse in on themselves. *BANG*. The painted sign over the entrance sweeps to one side and hangs off its hinges.

"WILL STOP!"

Eventually, he hears her and turns around. For a moment, neither of them utter a word. The two not-quite-teenagers stand opposite each other in the rain, among the splintered debris of their childhood

fortress. And something changes in that instant. A subtle but wrenching shift; like some great bell tolling the announcement of a death. Of whom or what Faye doesn't know, but whatever it is - it's irreversible.

When Will finally speaks, his voice is skewered with pain. "It's all messed up."

"What is?" Faye trembles.

"Everything!" Will shouts, throwing his arms up. "The whole Party is falling apart and no-one cares!"

Faye shakes her head vehemently. "That's not true."

"Yes it is!" The acidity of Will's tone makes her flinch. "It's been like this for months! We don't do any of the stuff we used to anymore. When was the last time we went to the arcade? Or played D&D without me dragging everyone to the table? When was the last time any of us even saw Dustin?"

A lump forms in Faye's throat and she swallows thickly. "We saw him when he got back from camp."

Will scoffs. "Yeah exactly - days ago! The five of us used to be *inseparable*, and now look! Dustin's not even talking to us, and everyone else is fighting."

He looks at her then and the frustration seems to drain out of him, replaced by something worse. An expression of hurt, undercut by betrayal. "But you know what, I could deal with all of that. I could deal with anything, no matter how shitty it was - as long as I had you."

This pushes Faye over the edge and tears spill down her cheeks. She has to choke back a sob to get any words out. "You still have me."

"Do I?" Will asks, his voice cracking. It's difficult to tell in the rain, but Faye knows he's crying too. "Then why did you go off with El and Max yesterday?"

"Because I was angry! You guys all ganged up on me and made it

sound as if I ditched you on purpose!" Faye yells.

Will gives an exaggerated shrug. "Well if it wasn't on purpose then what were you doing that was so important?"

"I thought my mom was having an affair."

It takes a few seconds for Will to process this. "What?"

Faye sighs. "I read her mind and saw her with... Billy."

"Billy?!"

A tiny slither of relief pushes its way through Faye's hysteria, now that she's finally making him understand. "*That's* why I had to talk to Max. And then El showed up all upset over Mike, so Max took us shopping to take our minds off everything and I just *forgot* about D&D. I'm sorry!"

Will says nothing, and at first Faye thinks he doesn't believe her, but then she notices he's no longer looking at her. His hand reaches up to the back of his neck and his eyes - which a moment ago were sizzling with anger and hurt - glaze over entirely. Faye is about to ask him what's wrong when suddenly she feels it.

It hits her from all sides with dizzying force and the air is knocked from her lungs. Cold, unlike any she's ever known, lashes into Faye's body and seems to pierce her to the core; as if she has just fallen through thin ice into a frozen lake. Something spidery crawls over the base of her neck and Faye instinctively slaps it away, but it makes no difference. It's like the crawling is *under* her skin. Red spots puncture Faye's vision and she sways on her feet, struggling to keep her balance.

And then inexplicably, someone starts to laugh. It's not a joyful laugh, it's not even a human laugh. The sound grates on her eardrums until Faye is certain they're bleeding, and she clamps her hands over them. Her mouth is open in a scream, but Faye can't hear anything over the harrowing laughter - which rises and rises until it becomes a cataclysmic, deafening roar. And he's there. A thousand miles away, inches from her face... Faye can't tell. But he's *there*.

The Mind Flayer.

"*Will!*"

Splashing footsteps race towards them and a moment later Mike and Lucas burst into the clearing. Their eyes widen as they take in the ruin of Castle Byers, and the white-faced terror in Faye and Will's expressions.

"What happened?" Mike breathes.

Faye and Will turn to each other. She can't say it. She can't. The fright has severed her vocal chords.

Will says it for her. "He's back."